

Pete Stark's Legislative Report, Jan 2009

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HELPING FAMILIES THROUGH THE RECESSION

Our country is in a recession. The financial difficulties facing America's families won't be solved by the federal government buying up banks, bailing out giant industries, or rewarding the gamblers on Wall Street that helped fuel the recession. That's why I voted against the last \$700 billion bailout package when it came before Congress.

Instead, the federal government needs to look at mechanisms to put money into the hands of people who've lost their jobs, their health care, and sometimes their homes.

At the top of the Congressional agenda in January is passage of a comprehensive economic recovery act. This package needs to accomplish two goals. First, it must increase funding for programs that provide a safety net for people hurting from the recession. Second, it must provide immediate funding for infrastructure projects that will put people to work right away.

Here are my priorities for the economic recovery legislation:

Food Stamps: An alltime high of 30 million Americans are receiving food stamps, but the average benefit is only \$3 per day. Increasing that benefit helps lower-income Americans afford the essentials, and generates \$1.75 in stimulus for every \$1 the government spends.

Health Care: The failing economy makes more families eligible for Medicaid at the very time states can least afford to pay that bill. Increasing the federal portion of states' Medicaid budgets will help protect these critical programs from devastating budget cuts. We must also take steps to ensure that people who've lost their jobs have affordable, temporary health coverage.

Energy Costs: We should increase funding for the Low Income Home Energy Assistance Program (LIHEAP), which helps struggling families pay their utility bills.

Education: We must provide emergency education assistance to states. As states continue to feel the budget crunch, it is vital that we help them avoid teacher lay-offs and classroom overcrowding.

Homeowners: Unlike the bailout legislation that just helped Wall Street, this package must include provisions to help homeowners who are struggling to pay their mortgages and avoid foreclosure.

Infrastructure: We must make investments in our nation's roads, bridges and public transportation. California already has \$28 billion of these "shovel ready" programs that could begin within 60 days. These programs will put people to work immediately, while providing positive returns.

These investments won't be cheap. We have already spent close to \$1 trillion in Iraq and passed a \$700 billion bailout for Wall Street. Investing in American families will help people more quickly, and makes more sense for our future.

OPPOSING THE AUTO BAILOUT

I am strongly opposed to bailing out the auto industry.

The Big Three are failing because they have been mismanaged. The workers are not to blame - they have already accepted deep wage and benefit cuts. Even when credit was flowing freely, people weren't buying Detroit's products. We shouldn't bail out managers who can't manage very well.

I am in favor of providing assistance to workers, which is why I've proposed buying retired auto workers into Medicare. This would save the auto industry tens of billions in health care costs. Unfortunately, the auto companies are insisting on cold hard cash. I have little faith they'll use those funds to help workers.

NUMMI, a UAW-organized plant, has been building Corollas that people want to buy, and that have made a profit for

Toyota. If Fremont can make cars people want to buy, so can Detroit.

HEALTH CARE REFORM:

ACHIEVING UNIVERSAL HEALTH CARE

Our health care system is in vital need of reform. At least 46 million people have no insurance at all, while tens of millions more lack adequate coverage. On indicators that measure the quality of health care, the U.S. lags behind most other developed nations. In addition, high health costs are one of many factors contributing to the recession and job loss in our country.

The incoming President has made clear that health care reform is his priority. The selection of former Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle as his Secretary of Health and Human Services underscores how serious they are on the health care front.

To achieve universal care, the President-elect and many of us in Congress agree that we must build on what works. We must strengthen employer-sponsored coverage - where 160 million people get their health care today. We must also create a new health care "exchange" where people who don't have employersponsored health care can purchase affordable, adequate coverage. This exchange would include private insurance options, as well as a new public plan that I think should be modeled on Medicare.

I have proposed my own bill, AmeriCare, which would achieve universal health care. Under AmeriCare, those who are happy with their existing employer-based coverage could keep it. Everyone would have the option of enrolling in AmeriCare -- a new, universally available program modeled on Medicare. I think AmeriCare provides a solid template to start our work toward universal health care.

Health reform will be a critical issue in this new year, and I look forward to working with the President-elect helping lead the way to universal health care.

FINALLY ENDING THE IRAQ WAR

The legacy of the Iraq war is tragic. Over 4,200 American troops have been killed. The number of wounded range from 30,000 to 100,000. Approximately one million Iraqis have been killed, with two million more wounded. A Nobel Prize-winning economist last month pegged the dollar cost of the Iraq War at \$3 trillion to the American economy, and \$8.6 trillion to the Iraqi economy.

The process of withdrawal has begun. The U.N. resolution authorizing U.S. troops in Iraq has expired. In its place, the Iraqi government has approved a bilateral security agreement with the U.S. which requires our combat troops to leave Iraqi cities and towns by June 30, 2009 and to withdraw completely by the end of 2011.

While I am glad the withdrawal process has finally begun, I want our troops home now. The Bushnegotiated bilateral agreement could keep our troops in Iraq for more than two more years. That's wrong.

President-elect Obama brings a new chance for peace. He has stated that he wants all combat troops out of Iraq within 16 months of his inauguration.

I still believe we must end this war now, and I will continue to support efforts to withdraw our troops immediately.

ENSURING FULL EQUALITY FOR WOMEN

For the last eight years, the Administration has set back the rights of women at home and abroad. Next year, we have the chance to reverse that damage and make a difference on critical issues for women.

Equal pay for equal work: Women still make only 77 cents compared to every dollar made by men. In the last Congress, I cosponsored the Paycheck Fairness Act, which would have required employers to show that wage disparities are based on factors other than gender. I also supported the Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, which would have reversed a Supreme Court decision that made it harder for women to challenge acts of pay discrimination.

While both bills passed the House of Representatives last year, they didn't become law. With a new Congress and new Administration, we have real opportunity to banish the glass ceiling and accomplish true workplace fairness.

Paid Family Leave: Last year, I introduced the Family Leave Insurance Act, which would have provided paid leave to all workers to care for a new child, a sick family member, or recover from an illness. This bill would mean healthier children, stronger families, and more competitive businesses.

Effective family planning: The statistics don't lie: abstinence only education doesn't work. In contrast, family planning programs have proven effective at preventing unwanted pregnancies and the spread of sexually transmitted diseases. I will continue to support increased funding to programs like Title X, which funds low-cost, confidential family planning services that would otherwise be out of reach for many women. I will also continue to support accessible birth control and comprehensive sex education.

Protecting women's health: Too many women are not getting the medical services they need to lead healthy lives. More than 19 million women are uninsured in the U.S. We know that when women are uninsured, they are more likely to delay or go without care or preventive health procedures.

WORKING TO HALT GLOBAL WARMING

In the new Congress, we will have a President who understands the need for comprehensive action to address global warming.

Gas has dropped to a national average price below \$2 a gallon. While this is welcome news for our wallets, now is not the time to breathe a sigh of relief. Instead, we must redouble efforts to break our addiction to fossil fuels and move toward a clean energy economy. Doing so is vital if we are going to avoid the worst consequences of global warming. It is also an opportunity to create new, wellpaying jobs that cannot be outsourced.

The first order of business on global warming should be to allow California to implement comprehensive "clean cars" legislation. The Bush Administration has refused to grant California a waiver under the Clean Air Act that would allow the state to proceed in cutting CO2 emissions. I have repeatedly called on the EPA to grant the waiver and have cosponsored legislation that would allow California to proceed. But Congressional action isn't necessary if the President agrees. The incoming Obama Administration can immediately grant the waiver and allow California to lead the way on fighting global warming.

I expect Congress to work closely with the new Administration to move comprehensive global warming legislation and re-engage with the rest of the world in the battle. There are many options and ideas for how we reduce our carbon output. I support a carbon tax. Such a tax would increase the cost of burning fossil fuels - thereby encouraging conservation, efficiency, and development of alternative energy sources. I introduced a bill last year to do just that.

Whatever option Congress decides, we must act to drop our carbon output to the levels that scientists say are necessary. Each day that passes without action makes the challenge even more daunting.

Congress and the Obama Administration must move in concert and I expect we will.